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Occupied labour: dispossession through incorporation among Palestinian workers in Israel

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ABSTRACT

Promoting the employment of indigenous peoples has been a key strategy of economic development in settler colonial states. Israel's framing of occupied Palestinian labour in its economy has mirrored this approach, with an implicit claim that it contributes prosperity to the Palestinians. What this false promise hides is how employment and the economic incorporation of indigenous people can become a source of ongoing dispossession in and of itself: a kind of dispossession that is driven by workers' economic inclusion rather than being remedied through it. Based on ethnographic research among Palestinians from the occupied West Bank who work in Israel, this article explores the multiple dispossessions that result from such labour. The article explains how a neoliberal settler economy utilizes a meritocratic regime of indigenous employment to execute a colonial logic of domination. As access to jobs in the settler economy is made conditional on workers' political docility and their continued absence from communal life, the labour regime aims to turn Palestinian livelihood and Palestinian nationhood into mutually exclusive aspirations: it strives to undermine the Palestinians' capacity for social reproduction and anticolonial resistance.

KEYWORDS

Labour; dispossession; settler colonialism; mobility; Israel; Palestine

Settler colonial economies have not only built on the expropriation of indigenous land and property but also benefitted from the exploitation of the local workforce.[1] Today's liberal settler states often continue this legacy by promoting economic policies that frame the employment of indigenous workers as a form of economic development.[2] What the official framing of indigenous labour for 'prosperity' hides is how such employment can become an ongoing structure of dispossession in and of itself: a kind of dispossession from key aspects of social, economic and political life that is driven by workers' economic incorporation, rather than being remedied through it. Based on ethnographic research among Palestinians in the West Bank who work in Israel, I foreground the multiple dispossessions that result from indigenous labour incorporation in this settler colonial economy.

Such dispossessive labour is rooted in an ongoing process of violent accumulation that fulfils settler colonial objectives by means of employment. Settler colonists traditionally accumulated capital in violent ways with the help of looting, oppression, and war.[3]

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Among other things, colonial capital grew with the forceful expulsion of peasant populations, the commodification of labour power, and the colonial appropriation of resources and land.[4] The gradual displacement of peasantries, as has been the case in Palestine, allows colonists to appropriate them as labour surplus, which in turn allows capital to seize surplus labour time and make it work for the settler colonial economy.[5]

In the following analysis, I will go beyond the dominant focus on dispossession in terms of land and property, exploring instead a wider range of 'insidious' dispossessions that can take place without physical displacement, but have 'serious and structural impacts on the lives and livelihoods of individuals and communities'.[6] My expansion of the concept of dispossession takes inspiration from George Abed's analysis of the Palestinian economy, which suggested more than three decades ago that economic development under Israeli occupation produces dispossession not only in the narrow sense of making Palestinians landless, but in 'the broader meaning of robbing the affected population of the material basis to live and prosper as a community and further to deny this population the right and means to redress the grievances that arise as a result of this usurpation'.[7] Abed raised the important question of whether 'full employment', as an otherwise desirable development objective, should even be promoted if it only reinforces the occupation while Palestinians end up working in low-skilled jobs in Israel. This leads me to ask: What do the Palestinians lose by taking part in the Israeli labour market and what dispossessions result from their economic incorporation?

The Palestinians' experience demonstrates how a colonial paradigm of dispossessing and controlling an occupied indigenous population operates covertly in the spheres of employment and economic development. While Israel labels the employment of Palestinians as a contribution to 'prosperity' and a way of 'boosting' the West Bank economy, such employment helps to root out any basis for independent social and economic reproduction.[8] As access to work in Israel is made conditional on workers' ongoing compliance with the dispossessing regime, Palestinian livelihood and Palestinian nationhood are turned into mutually exclusive aspirations, the former becoming dependent on the negation of the latter. The Israeli market binds entire Palestinian cities and towns to its conditional provision of livelihoods and thereby attempts the economic and political unmaking of Palestine as a nation and economy, and of Palestinians as a social and political community. The Israeli labour regime aims to dispossess Palestinians of their capacity to resist colonialism.

Jewish settlers have employed Palestinians since the early decades of Zionism,[9] but the current labour regime has evolved since Israel's occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip in 1967. As Israel's economy gradually bound the Palestinians whose land it occupied to its economy for their livelihoods,[10] the occupation squeezed the West Bank into fragmented spaces where land, capital, and resources are increasingly off-limits for indigenous economic activity. With few alternatives left, around 133,000 Palestinian workers earned wages in Israeli jobs by 2019, while the Gaza Strip remained cut off under a blockade.[11] This mass participation of occupied labourers in the Israeli economy has significantly contributed to its construction, agriculture, and service sectors,[12] while bringing in relatively high wages for hundreds of thousands of West Bank residents: the Palestinians' average monthly income from Israeli jobs is about three times the Palestinian minimum wage of $412 USD, and far higher than the monthly average salary of $527 USD in the West Bank.[13] These financial benefits made Palestinians willing to take high risks and

circulate back and forth for cash, thereby becoming a disposable and flexible 'industrial reserve army' of mobile labour for sectors of the Israeli economy.[14]

The dual process of economic integration and colonial occupation has produced a seeming paradox, as the record number of Palestinians working in Israel coincides with one of the highest recorded unemployment rates in the world.[15] Only one in three Palestinians of working age was employed in 2019, 39.6 percent in the West Bank and 22.4 percent in Gaza.[16] Rather than contributing to economic prosperity, the mass employment of Palestinians in Israel seems only to have furthered the settler colonial objective of economic dispossession. My ethnography offers one explanation for this seeming paradox, rooted in the analysis of five forms of dispossession that result from the merging of colonial domination and economic integration in Palestinian labour in Israel: social dispossession, legal dispossession, temporal dispossession, economic dispossession, and political dispossession.

The *social dispossessions* resulting from labour in the Israeli economy diminish the Palestinians' capacity for social reproduction and a dignified communal life, alongside the destruction of childhoods through child labour. *Legal dispossession* emerges from the illegalization of unsanctioned labour, recurring detention, and ultimately a loss of access to livelihoods. As the need for a livelihood pressures Palestinians to keep on circulating, extensive commuting times and hard labour contribute to fatigue and *temporal dispossession*, which is one of the reasons why the majority of workers who die on Israeli construction sites are Palestinians.[17] *Economic dispossession* drains skilled workers from the dysfunctional local economy, while injecting irregular cash flows into towns and cities that become financially dependent on labour in Israel. This dependency on Israeli jobs and permits contributes to *political dispossession*, because continuing access to a livelihood is made conditional on political docility: Israeli authorities repeatedly use conditional Palestinian work permits as bargaining chips to recruit intelligence collaborators and withdraw permits to pressure families or communities who engage in political activism. From the perspective of the Israeli security establishment, keeping Palestinians busy and employed helps keep them quiet. As a senior official in Israel's so-called Civil Administration for the West Bank told me in a meeting: 'We view Palestinian employment as leading to stability in the area. This is our way of thinking. The new generation is looking for livelihood and understands the advantages of working in Israel'.

Building on the history of land expropriation and labour exploitation in Zionist settler colonialism,[18] I will show how dispossessive labour entrenches this settler colonial legacy in today's economic relations. Alongside Leila Farsakh's seminal work, which highlights the interdependence between land confiscation and the use of Palestinian labour in the period 1987–2000, much has been written on Palestinian workers in the Israeli economy over the last two decades.[19] This substantial body of scholarship includes research on the impact borders and checkpoints have on Palestinians,[20] and on how the occupation's unequal distribution of legal rights creates uncertainty and fear among Palestinians who cross into Israel for work, while undermining their access to legal protections.[21] Today's sophisticated permit regime for Palestinian labourers has been analysed as a complex mechanism of economic and political control.[22]

The analytical lens of *dispossession through labour incorporation* adds important insights to this work by foregrounding indigenous employment as a form of settler colonial dispossession in itself. This approach highlights the mutually reinforcing effects of

economic development and settler colonial domination, showing that labour is a key site for analysing overlapping modes of articulation between colonial and neoliberal logics. Indeed, the current success of Israel's colonial domination of Palestinians by means of employment builds on a wider neoliberal shift.

This shift has included the transformation of a multilateral 'peace plan' from Palestinian national liberation to 'economic stability, defined by consumerism and protections for foreign capital'.[23] The Palestinian Authority's own strategy of neoliberal institution building has somewhat mirrored this wider market-based approach, replacing anticolonial struggle with neocolonial relations and exchange.[24]As Palestinian imports of goods from Israel are 2.5–3 times higher than Palestinian exports to Israel,[25] labour commuters who earn wages in Israel ensure continued consumption of Israeli goods. While Palestinians continue to depend heavily on Israeli jobs, the globalization and neoliberalisation of Israel's economy has gradually reduced its dependence on Palestinian labour, thanks to attracting growing numbers of foreign workers since the 1990s.[26] At the same time, Israel sets quotas for Palestinian work permits depending on the need of its labour market, while the widespread unemployment its occupation has contributed to means that Palestinian labour is always available and over-supplied. In making the inherent dispossessions of Palestinian labour in Israel visible, I highlight how neoliberalisation, as a marketization of colonial relations, works to achieve settler colonial ends of domination by means of employment. Hiding colonial dispossession behind a market-based approach to economic development is one way through which this settler state legitimizes and normalizes itself and its policies of colonial domination.[27]

Other settler colonies have shown clearly how dispossession can result from ostensibly empowering economic relations. Research on the often-inconspicuous forms of dispossession in the fur trade revealed, for example, that even degrees of indigenous economic autonomy can ultimately serve and inform aggressive strategies of dispossession that accompany settler colonialism.[28] The promise of economic autonomy through labour has been used to camouflage exploitation as economic development in a variety of colonial labour regimes.[29] A case in point was South Africa's incorporation of Lesotho's workforce, which was framed as a source of prosperity in the 1970s and 1980s.[30] In a similar vein, ironwork in North American cities is said to serve indigenous workers as a 'lifeline' to the Reserves.[31] What these examples share with the Palestinian case is the spatial and economic confinement of reserves, enclaves, or occupied territories that creates the conditions for controlling the indigenous labour force while simultaneously utilizing its economic potential.

In the following analysis, I will first examine these wider conditions created by the occupation through a discussion of the history and contemporary relevance of Palestinian labour in Israel. I will then explore each of the five layers of dispossession that emerge from such labour, based on ethnographic research and interviews among workers in the West Bank and in Israel conducted primarily in 2017.

From occupied land to occupied labour: Palestinians in the settler economy

The use of Palestinian labour by Jewish settlers has played an important role in the Zionist project of establishing a state in Palestine. Palestinian smallholders who wanted to

supplement their returns from the traditional economy worked for settler agriculture in the nineteenth century, some 'working every day of the week'.[32] The need to employ growing numbers of Jewish immigrants soon led to a *conquest of labour* that transferred more work away from Arabs, in line with the dream of creating a Jewish nation.[33] When the State of Israel emerged from the Arab-Israeli War in 1948, amid the coerced flight and expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from the territory the Zionist forces captured,[34] most Palestinian-owned land was confiscated. Many of those who were displaced from the area of Palestine that had become Israel ended up under Jordanian rule in the West Bank or East Jerusalem, and under Egyptian rule in the Gaza Strip.

Israel initially focused on using employment as a means of controlling those Palestinians who had become Israeli citizens. It offered economic benefits and career pathways to 'good Arabs' who cooperated, while classifying many others as enemies within.[35] After the Six-Day-War of 1967, however, Israel gained full control of the Palestinian territories and expanded colonial policies of settlement and spatial control.[36] Israeli employers soon hired growing numbers of Palestinians: between 1968 and 1974, the numbers jumped from six per cent of the Palestinian labour force working in Israel to one-third, while wages and consumption in the Palestinian territories rose significantly in that period as the unemployment rate dropped.[37] However, this mass incorporation of Palestinians was only tolerated in Israel because it did not involve a recognition of Palestinians' workers' rights.[38]

The occupation led to a process of 'bantustanisation', whereby Israel grabbed land and reduced Palestinians to restricted territories, to then include them as workers in the coloniser's economy while simultaneously limiting indigenous agriculture and the development of an independent economy.[39] Agriculture used to be of critical importance to the Palestinian economy and accounted for more than 20 percent of GDP in the early 90s, absorbing a quarter of the labour force.[40] In 2011 the 'besieged' agricultural sector only accounted for 5.5 percent of GDP,[41] and by 2015 only 9 percent of the labour force remained employed in the sector.[42]

This gradual elimination of the traditional Palestinian economy increased the need for employment in Israeli jobs. Today's workers are often ex-farmers who had to move into Israel or into settlements for work, because their productive land has become confiscated or inaccessible. As a local trade union official in the West Bank town of Qalqiliyah explained to me, while pointing behind the Separation Barrier to formerly productive land used by the local residents: 'Slowly our markets became empty and our economy became completely entangled with their economy'. While saying that labour in Israel is a necessity that resulted from the occupation, he added that 'work in Israel is not a solution, it's part of the problem'. Palestinian labour in Israel no longer contributed to the economic build-up of the Palestinian economy as it once did, but rather worked to destroy it.

Qalqiliyah is a case in point. As a major Palestinian city in the Northern West bank, it has been surrounded at all sides by the Separation Barrier and so-called 'Area C', which is under full Israeli control. As the city and its economy can no longer expand, local construction demand is suppressed and workers are pushed into Israel.[43] Similar effects are visible in many places across the West Bank and around Jerusalem. In the Palestinian 'enclave' Biddu outside Jerusalem, which is surrounded by the Separation Barrier, the agricultural activist Mohamed estimated that 80 percent of their agricultural lands now lay behind the wall, saying:

> This wall is fighting us economically; it even contributes to a rise in poverty among our people. In order to have any future for our youths, they have to emigrate or work inside the Green Line [in Israel] and in the settlements. But not everyone can go and work: you need a permit. We don't have any commercial places, factories and opportunities for Palestinian workers, they have to go and work there.

Even as the colonization of Palestinian land facilitates the growing need for alternative sources of livelihood, Israeli governments and officials frame the employment of Palestinians as a promotion of prosperity, while hoping to increase 'the economic utility of the Palestinian inhabitants' to advance Israel's economic interests'.[44] But such economic utility could only be realized if the workers' movements are tightly controlled and their rights restricted. This was already evident in the 1980s, when growing cross-border mobility meant that Israelis soon asked for more control of Palestinians. In 1991, emergency legislation dissolved the general exit permit that allowed Palestinians to enter Israel. Deepening segregation and movement control followed, blending segregation with ongoing economic incorporation of cheap workers.[45] The numbers of Palestinians working in Israel had shrunk during the Frist Intifada (1987–1993), which was a time of intense turmoil, but soon hundreds of thousands of immigrants from the Soviet Union to Israel in the 1990s increased the demand for construction and opened the tap for an inflow of Palestinian workers once again.[46]

The wider process of underdevelopment and subordination of the West Bank to Israel was effectively 'cloaked as a beneficial process of modernization' and neoliberalisation, with Palestinian employment at its core.[47] The quintessential Palestinian labourer became the centrepiece of a process of economic development, a lone 'entrepreneur' who must sustain entire families as the breadwinner. The radical neoliberalisation and privatization of Israel's economy into a globalized and liberalized market economy from the 1980s onwards[48] took place alongside simultaneous efforts to reorganize racial and colonial domination, while creating an increasingly regulated regime of Palestinian labour mobility.[49]

Legal dispossession

The dispossessive labour regime for Palestinians employs legal mechanisms of colonial control that are designed to confine the movement of the occupied population, including a restrictive permit system that legalizes the mobility of some while prohibiting it for others.[50] During one of my research visits in the Palestinian town of Yatta in the West Bank, I drove to the border zone with Abu Firas[51], my host and a local official in the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU). Near the concrete wall that separates Israel from the southern West Bank, we saw four-wheel drives bring groups of men down to where the wall breaks. As the passengers stepped out, a car motored towards them, kicking up a massive dust cloud. The Palestinian men get in and the car sped away towards one of many Israeli towns and cities. All of this repeated itself almost every evening. Yatta is the major southern hub for irregular Palestinian labour movements into Israel. Some 37,000 Palestinians without official permits smuggle themselves into Israel regularly.[52]

Once they enter Israel without a permit, they become vulnerable to detention. Firas from Yatta was arrested five times until he could no longer risk it and found himself stranded back home. A grocer in Yatta told me about his own experience: 'I used to

work in Israel for a long time, without a permit, smuggled in. But two years ago, they caught me and now I cannot risk going, because I might end up in prison. It's too risky, I have children here'. He lamented that his shop barely paid for the essentials his family needed. Working without a permit initially leads to income opportunities but eventually undermines a sustainable livelihood. According to Nasser Raba'i, the director of Yatta's municipality at the time of my research, some 15,000 adults and children from Yatta worked in Israel without a permit under 'threatening conditions'. When the Israeli authorities caught Firas for the third time without a permit, they prevented him from re-entering. 'If they catch you again, you sit in six months or longer. I was not allowed to enter Israel for four years. In total I was in prison five times. The longest period was six months', he explained. Many workers sustained economically vulnerable families and frequently accumulated debts. Once caught by the police and detained, their debts only grow further because their access to an income from Israeli jobs becomes both more difficult and more dangerous. Those who are forced to work without a permit bear financial risks and many never escape this cycle.

At the time of research, Israeli regulations allowed men above 55 and women above 50 to enter and work without a permit. But young men were only eligible for permits if they were married and at least 22 years old, although age limits varied across different sectors. Those who are denied working permits for 'security reasons' must live with the anxiety of having been marked by the Israeli government.[53] Although these rules sound clearly defined, uncertainty is key to the permit system. As one of the workers in Suad Amiry's book, *Nothing to Lose but your Life,* phrases it, the Palestinians 'are sentenced in advance': they already know they are stuck when they begin to move.[54] Those denied entry into Israel numbered a few thousand before the outbreak of the Al Aqsa Intifada in 2000, and nearly a quarter of a million by 2006.[55] Most young men without permits in places like Yatta must seek work in Israel covertly. Whole towns are thereby bound to the rhythm of the Israeli labour market and the workers' movements, producing an ebb and flow of people and money that defines the tides of Palestinian social life and economic life in the West Bank.

Social dispossession

A closer look at the town of Yatta makes clear how labour mobility into Israel is both a result of colonial dispossession and one of its driving forces. According to Abu Firas, only 1,600 of Yatta's working-age residents were employed locally, with a total population of around 65,000.[56] The municipality estimated that 75 percent of the labour force in Yatta, which is one of the largest towns in the West Bank, worked inside Israel. Once known for breeding sheep and producing yoghurt, much of the area has become urbanized while the Israeli occupation restricts the freedom to move and work the land.[57]

For Abu Firas, a passionate trade unionist and political activist, the near-inevitable dependency on working in Israel was a bitter pill to swallow. His oldest son could no longer enter Israel for work after repeated prison terms for doing so without permits. The second oldest worked on Israeli construction sites with a legal permit, and the third oldest did so without. The youngest, only 16, was looking to smuggle himself across the barrier for the second time during school holidays. Once there, he worked seven days a week, 12 hours a day, at a car wash. Without local jobs and the looming

prospect of unemployment, most Palestinian youths look across the separation barrier to Israel for livelihood and a future.

This labour incorporation of adults and children reconfigures Palestinian lives and social relations by generating 'social dispossession', in the sense of destroying the capacity for sociality, community, and social reproduction.[58] This includes the 'phatic labour' that builds social relations, families, social infrastructure, and values in a given community.[59] Social dispossession through labour incorporation orients entire Palestinian communities towards capitalist social relations with Israel, while depriving them of the means to control key aspects of social and family life outside of this dependency.

Indeed, the impact of working in Israel weighed heavily on social life and on families in Yatta. Combined with fatigue and a chronic lack of time, their circular labour mobility enforced social absence at home. As a mother of three young men in Yatta put it, all of whom worked in Israel and stayed there for weeks or months on end: 'I am not happy that all of them must work in Israel. But what should we do?' Most Palestinian jobs in Israel and in the settlements are in construction, which means that the overall majority of Palestinian workers in Israel are men, further widening the already large gender gap in the labour force participation rate: compared to 7 out of 10 males who participated in the labour force, only 2 out of 10 females did so at the time of research. The male-dominated construction sector accounted for 64 per cent of the total Palestinian employment in the Israel and Israeli settlements.[60] The result is protracted male absence that imposes a heavy burden on women and their role in the 'reproductive economy'.[61]

Mufid, one of Firas's friends, used to work without a permit for six years and said, 'It was so hard. You don't see your kids'. During a meeting at the Yatta municipality, a local official said that working in Israel had a 'very bad impact on the family, because as a father, you are never there'. This resonated with what Ibtisam Husary, CEO of the Palestinian Fund for Employment and Social Protection, called 'a social problem': workers leaving in the morning and not returning for weeks, without time to take care of their children. 'This creates problems and a social impact', she said, adding that Palestinian workers in Israel and the settlements can 'become mentally and socially isolated; they don't feel that they are Palestinians anymore'. As the labour regime enforces their absence from home and their community, it somehow enforces a distance not only from their family but also from communal life and a sense of nationhood.

Firas, who ran a repair service for air conditioners and fridges, was one of few who managed to rebuild a business back home after repeated detention for entering Israel without a permit. Pointing to the benefits of his newly acquired independence, he said: 'Life without Israel is much better. I am close to my family, my town, and don't risk my health, don't spend times in prison. I am also able to engage more in the community, like I am responsible for a football club'.

The social effects on working adults are paralleled by the labour incorporation of children, exacerbating the destructive social impact on the local community. 'Breaking the indigenous community's ability to socially reproduce across time is at the heart of the settler colonial project', and the destruction of childhood forms part of this strategy.[62] On a weekend back home in Yatta, Abu Firas's 18-year-old son Mohamed told me that most of his friends from school worked inside Israel, saying: 'I left school two years ago when I was 16. Many of the younger pupils go to work in Israel during their school holidays. You are in constant danger without a permit, that they put you into prison'.

According to Amir, a teacher in one of Yatta's schools, many children start working at the age of 14. He estimated that on average, five pupils per class dropped out of school to work in Israel. 'Maybe 75 for one school alone', he said, adding, 'We have around 10 schools, so you talk about 750 [children] a year'. This problem was part of a vicious circle. The students needed to contribute to families where the main breadwinner was either too old for the hard work, injured, unemployed, or barred from entering Israel after being caught without permits. As Amir explained:

> Wages in Israel are much higher. Because of this, the local student will not try to start up some project here, work his land, or open a factory. The student at school thinks I want to leave school and make money in Israel to build his future, he wants to marry, build a house and buy a car. (…) The unemployment among the educated is very high. They will think about working in Israel, or about emigrating altogether.

One evening, a 12-year-old boy selling cigarette lighters in West Jerusalem told me that he was there because of his father's work accident in Israel. 'I have to contribute to the family', he said, adding that he had to stay away from home all week but usually crossed the border near Yatta. 'If I don't make enough money I don't go back', he said. After a night of selling lighters to Jerusalemites and tourists who drink in the city's bars and eat at its restaurants, he slept in a market stall for 30 Israeli Shekels ($8.5 USD) a night alongside other children. The prevalence of child labour and the damaging health effects of such labour underline that Yatta's future lives and dies at work in Israel. Working in Israel offers immediate cash and promises a solid income to build a viable future, but ultimately comes at the expense of their capacity to shape such a future independently.

Economic dispossession

The social and legal dispossessions of Palestinian labourers go hand in hand with gradual economic dispossession that partly results from the very labour incorporation that promises a livelihood. Since the occupation began in 1967, gradual 'de-development'[63] has undermined a sustainable Palestinian economy and labour in Israel forms part of this process. The constraints Israel imposes on the West Bank have hollowed out productive sectors and made the economy reliant on consumption-driven growth and aid. Restrictions on trade and the movement of certain goods mean the Palestinian economy is unable to access modern technology and can no longer grow in a sustainable manner.[64] In this context, the mass incorporation of the Palestinian labour force into Israel has allowed for consumption and economic survival, but simultaneously deepened dependency and drained skilled workers from the West Bank. According to Samir Salameh, who was Assistant Deputy Minister at the Palestinian Ministry of Labour at the time of research:

> The positive impact are the remittances of workers and the money they bring back here. They spend it in the Palestinian market and this will affect it positively. But the negative impact is that we lose the most professional people: The Israelis don't just employ anybody. If you look at construction, most of our workers in construction and agriculture go to Israel. Most of our farms are abandoned because they work in Israel. And when they come back to work on it, they realise Israel pays much higher salaries. On the short run, it's good for them, on the long run, it's not.

The Israeli labour market makes entire Palestinian cities economically dependent. This became clear when I accompanied Firas on repair jobs to local households in Yatta, where customers asked to pay later, when their sons came back from Israel with cash. They were often unsure when that would be. Most business income depended on this uncertain and irregular financial flow, as the owner of an electronic store pointed out: 'I make 350 percent of average sales on Saturdays and weekends. Some of them don't have the money so they ask us to put it on credit'.

Even the provision of basic municipal services depended on remittances. When Israel cancelled working permits and blocked movement around Yatta following an armed attack on Israelis by locals in 2016, the temporary unemployment rate temporarily 'jumped from 19 to 40 percent', according to Nasser Raba'i at the Yatta municipality. Consequently, the municipality could not claim electricity payments from families during that month. 'They cannot pay the fees and also have a family they need to feed. So, as a municipality, we made debts', said Raba'i, adding:

> The commercial places were influenced, the mini markets. The worker consumes with some of the money he brings home, but if he doesn't … it has a huge influence. This is reflected on social life too, to the point that some say I didn't work today so I cannot have dinner.

The Palestinian Authority has largely failed to create local alternatives to working in Israel and in settlements. Upon election in 2017, Yatta's new mayor, Ibrahim Abu Zahra, told me about plans to bring more professional training to the town. He wanted to create employment through renewal and infrastructure projects. Yet he admitted that 'without work in Israel you cannot live here'.

The Israeli occupation robbed the West Bank of key ingredients for attracting investments too. Asked about future projects and investments, the Yatta municipality cited problems with access to harbours and trade, and restrictions on imports and exports. Israel prevents some 56 so-called 'dual-use' items from entering the West Bank that could be appropriated for military purposes, including equipment that has communication functions.[65] Some machinery needed for a local professional training programme in Yatta was stuck at Haifa ports for two years, according to the municipality. 'Adding the political changes taking place, the confiscation of lands, and the settlements – under these circumstances you cannot have a functioning local economy or local economic development', said Nasser Raba'i.

Decades of labour extraction and the wider impact of the Israeli occupation have undermined a functioning Palestinian economy. At the same time, neoliberalisation of the Israeli economy, the large-scale immigration of Arab-Jews (Mizrahim) and Russians, and the growing employment of foreign workers, have all made Israel less dependent on Palestinian workers. Growing unemployment in the occupied territory has further increased the surplus of Palestinian labour available to Israel depending on market demands: even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Palestinian labour market was 'among the worst-performing in the world'. Its employment-to-population ratio, which the ILO sees as 'a key indicator for monitoring the capacity of an economy to generate jobs', stood at only 33.1 per cent in 2019, the second lowest rate in the world; and youth unemployment was at 40.2 percent.[66]

By gradually reducing Israeli dependence on Palestinian workers, neoliberal restructuring has enabled Israel to intensify a market-based approach to colonization, effectively

inscribing effects of colonial dispossession into capitalist labour incorporation. Looking at the insidious dispossessions of labour reveals what Wolfe and Lloyd called the 'systemic harmony' between military occupation, as a version of colonial intervention, and the practices of the neoliberal state that promote a new regime of capital accumulation.[67]

A combination of settler colonialism and neoliberal capitalism also produces the ghettoization of Palestinian areas in the West Bank and their economic dependence. Such 'neoliberal colonization' turns occupied Palestinian areas into 'containers designed to warehouse a racialized surplus population'.[68] Facilitating the controlled movement of workers from these 'warehouses' into Israel demanded an increasingly restrictive and highly regulated mobility regime, to connect enclosed Palestinian labourers with an 'open' neoliberal economy in a way that guarantees that they have limited rights and freedoms and that they cannot stay in Israel for reasons other than work. The ongoing circulation of workers thus becomes a key component of Israeli capital accumulation through dispossession.

Temporal dispossession

Most Palestinian workers in Israel enter officially through checkpoints and commute on a daily or weekly basis. These fortified military checkpoints are part of a sophisticated technology of geographical control Israel deploys to perpetuate colonial domination.[69] The traffic through checkpoints between Israel and the West Bank can move slowly as soldiers search cars and individuals on foot wait in queues to have their papers checked. The northern West Bank town of Qalqiliyah was once a vibrant market town, but now the concrete barrier almost entirely encircles it, cutting it off from productive farmland. Tellingly, this formerly vibrant market town – once a place to be – has become a main gateway for workers to cross into Israel – a place to pass through. In the middle of the night, cars rush through its unlit streets towards the Israeli checkpoint at the walled-off edge of town. As workers exit cars and taxis, salespeople begin intensive morning shifts at dozens of market stands, selling snacks, coffee, and cigarettes. These checkpoints are a heavy burden for the workers: several thousand Palestinians push through here every morning – so many that a team of 70 volunteer 'herders' of the Palestinian trade union had to keep the masses in order, pull out people who faint, and make sure women and children do not get crushed.

One day at the checkpoint, I met Ahmed from Tubas, a remote town in the eastern edge of the northern West Bank. Ahmed, who was on his way back home after a shift, described his commute the following way:

> I come from Tubas and leave the house at 2:45, very early, so I can get to the checkpoint on time. I arrive here at 4:10, more or less an hour and a half just to get here. If there are any flying checkpoints on the way, it can take more than two hours to just get here. These checkpoints happen sometimes, sometimes once or twice a week around Nablus. So, you have to take a far-flung detour to get here.

These commutes easily add up to four or five hours a day for the return trip, usually for no more than 100 kilometres. The circular journeys and commutes represent a form of dispossession from access to time, which further contributes to the dispossession from the capacity to lead a social and political life because it enforces prolonged absences

from home. At the same time, Palestinian commuting involves skilful navigation and is an individual investment to fulfil the meritocratic aspiration for economic gains. But as the labour regime regulates and disciplines workers through control of time and mobility, it severely limits their individual capacity to navigate it. The workers' confined movements express the power an Israeli settler colonial project holds over this occupied place and its economy.[70]

On a different day in the early morning hours, at the same checkpoint, I talked to Bashir from Qalqiliyah who explained that even he had to wake up at three in the morning although he lived near the checkpoint. Asked about how this impacted his life, he laughed and said: 'I don't live, it's mostly work'. After having worked in Israel for 30 years to support his seven children, he now said that, 'in one or two years I want to stop working in Israel, it's enough'. The problem is that economic dependency has made it increasingly difficult for Palestinians to dissociate from the Israeli labour market and by extension, from the ongoing circulation it demands. Moreover, the Israeli regime dispossesses Palestinian workers from their control over time in the sense that working permits regulate how long they can stay inside Israel each day or week. Most permit holders are required, by definition of their permit's regulation, to travel back every evening. They would break the law if they slept near their place of work and risked having their permit revoked. This obliged them to keep on circulating.

The software programmer Raed from Nablus, who worked in a start-up in Tel Aviv, had to move back every evening. He is one among growing numbers of Palestinan IT specialists that are incorporated into the Israeli 'start-up nation', which is exemplary for the neoliberal Zionist governmentality.[71] Although being part of an innovative economy that is celebrated as global and open, Raed's employer had to renew his working permit every three months. This resulted in recurring periods of being stuck and waiting in his hometown. What he experienced as a fragmented journey enforced long waiting hours, uncertainty, fatigue, and dispossession from valuable time. Raed's journey from Tel Aviv back home began with a bus form his workplace to the city's outskirts, where we waited for a bus towards Israel's third largest settlement, Ariel, at a major thoroughfare. Not allowed to enter Ariel like all other passengers, Raed had to get off at a road junction where the taxis to Nablus stood waiting. On the next morning he would awake early to make the journey back.

Raed's morning journey was no less time-consuming and started with a walk to the taxi station in Nablus, from where he boarded a van to Qalqiliyah. Midway, Raed fell asleep. 'Every minute of sleep counts', he said with a smile, before slumbering away again. At the checkpoint, zig-zag shaped tunnels of iron bars led into the centre of the terminal, where Israeli officials checked his documents and scanned his body. Above us on metal bridges were men in plain clothes pointed their automatic rifles down on the waiting Palestinians. After the crossing, Raed got stuck on the other side of the terminal, when the last full minivan to Tel Aviv drove away in front of our eyes. After almost an hour, he finally boarded a private van that was about to leave empty towards Tel Aviv. Despite the tribulations of the journey, complaining was not an option for Raed. He knew that his continued access to a work permit depended on his acceptance of the underlying conditions of the regime.

According to Jihad, a Palestinian citizen of Israel and official in the General Organization of Workers in Israel (*histadrut*), the current regime reconfigures the relationship

between time and work in an unsustainable way: 'If you take a person, like a machine, if you operate it for 24 hours, if it would usually last for ten years, it will only last for five years instead. For the workers, it is the same'.

Political dispossession

Conditional labour inclusion restricts Palestinians' political freedom through an attempted process of *silencing* that is typical for colonial-neoliberal economies. In the shape of financial settlements, or compensation payments, such silencing can mute indigenous people's future claims and triggers economic dispossessions.[72] The conditional incorporation of Palestinians in the Israeli economy achieved a similar kind of silencing by enforcing political docility.

Working permits are conditional on a worker not being marked as a 'security threat' and the Israeli security agency, Shin Bet, exploits the conditionality of Palestinians' access to these permits by pressuring them to become informers.[73] The state effectively converted the Palestinians' economic dependency into a political tool of control. Many Palestinians are double dispossessed, because the occupation has cut them off from a viable economy and from productive land at home, while also denying them work permits for Israel. Mohamed, a cultural activist in the Biddu enclave near Jerusalem, has been involved in the local resistance movement against the Separation Barrier and worked with youth to invigorate agriculture on terraces. Asked whether he could work in Israel, he shook his head, explaining that as a prominent activist, he would not get an entry permit.

At workplaces and construction sites in Israel, Palestinians often had to employ tactics of de-politicization and invisibility in order to maintain their continuing access to jobs and working permits.[74] Asked whether they participated in political demonstrations or any form of activism, one group of workers in a Tel Aviv construction site told me that those who joined protests were frequently banned from entering Israel, while *they* could come to Tel Aviv and earn money to maintain their families: their livelihood became dependant on their adoption of an apolitical, meritocratic, hard-working persona. One of the workers added: 'What would you do?' In a similar vein, Palestinians in Yatta underlined the political pressure their permits involved. Some spoke of their experience with 'recruiters' of Israel's Internal Security Agency, saying their permits were used to pressure them into becoming informers. 'We workers cannot talk about politics. Maybe I say something … then they say I am politically active and I can no longer enter', said one construction worker in Yatta, during a meeting at the local trade union office.

More than being a tool to control Palestinians, labour incorporation binds entire towns and communities to the Israeli economy and thereby raises political concerns on a national level. As Yatta's economy and the livelihoods of its residents hung precariously on a string in Israeli hands, nobody really wanted that string to snap. After two attackers from Yatta opened fire in a Tel Aviv shopping mall in 2016, the Israeli defence ministry was quick to announce that the town will 'pay the price'.[75] The Israeli army blocked entrances to Yatta, and Israel revoked 83,000 travel permits for Palestinians throughout the West Bank. The father of one of the attackers told a newspaper that his son 'has destroyed his future', suggesting that this future required access to Israeli jobs. Individuals and families have been denied permits for far less than such attacks. Sometimes it is

enough to share a last name with someone classified as a security threat, with hundreds of permits cancelled this way each year.[76]

Samir Salameh, at the time Assistant Deputy Minister at the Palestinian Ministry of Labour in Ramallah, said in a meeting at his office: 'If (working) permits will be cancelled we will find ourselves in a serious problem. If suddenly 100.000 people are unemployed, what to do with them?'

This wider national political pressure to refrain from anticolonial resistance was reflected on the local level among Israeli employers who opposed workers who dared to complain or ask for their rights. On multiple occasions, workers and NGO fieldworkers in the Jordan Valley told me about a blacklist among agricultural settlements that is used to maintain exploitative working conditions away from the influence of Israeli law. According to Abed, a staff member of an NGO that fights for workers' rights:

> Those in the valley who work in agriculture have no alternative. The problem is that the Israeli employers share the names of Palestinians who opened a case against them or caused problems. They keep a blacklist. (…) All Israeli employers in the valley here know one another and have a council. They register their names and prevent them from working.

Abed specialized in work accidents and, together with unionists in Jericho, held a weekly drop-in clinic for workers to file their complaints. Sitting at the Jericho office of the Union, Dari browsed through documents and explained that he recently opened 44 cases, amounting to a total claim of unpaid sick days of around 200.000 Israeli Shekels ($57,500). This sum included cases of workers who had accidents and were forced to pay for medical treatment out of their own pocket, although it would be the responsibility of the employer to cover insurance. Others had permanent disabilities resulting from accidents and were seeking compensation. All of this added up to half a million Shekel, or around $150,000, for only a few dozens of workers. Yet, he admitted that most workers never filed such a complaint because they were intimidated, did not have hard evidence of employment, or did not believe that they would succeed as Palestinians in an Israeli court. The labour regime pre-emptively dispossesses them of political and legal agency by means of intimidation.

Conclusion: labour as settler colonial dispossession

The incorporation of Palestinian labourers into Israel produces multiple dispossessions that exemplify how this settler economy employs a meritocratic regime of indigenous employment to execute a colonial logic of domination. This logic includes the objective of settler colonialism to successfully impose political and economic control over a colonial domain.[77] As access to jobs is made conditional on workers' political docility and their continued absence from communal life, the labour regime turns Palestinian livelihood and Palestinian nationhood into mutually exclusive aspirations. Structured into a long-standing process of neoliberalisation in Israel and within the Palestinian Authority, this mass incorporation of workers promises prosperity and economic development, while undermining the Palestinians' capacity to engage in anticolonial resistance and build an independent economy. What this false promise of prosperity through labour hides is how employment and the economic incorporation of

indigenous people can become a source of ongoing dispossession in and of itself: a kind of dispossession that is driven by workers' economic inclusion rather than being remedied through it.

I have analysed this process based on five intersecting dispossessions that result from Palestinian labour incorporation in the Israeli settler economy. *Social dispossession* undermines Palestinians' capacity for social reproduction and a communal life, while transforming childhoods into risky and precarious labour without legal permits. This unsanctioned labour of youths and adults leads to *legal dispossessions,* by means of recurring detention, illegalization, and frequently a loss of access to the Israeli economy. The extensive commuting times and ongoing circulation of Palestinian workers result in *temporal dispossession*, while e*conomic dispossession* drains skilled workers from the dysfunctional local economy and makes entire towns financially dependent on the cash flow from labour in Israel. This dependency ultimately contributes to *political dispossessions*, as employers pressure workers to refrain from challenging exploitative practices and the Israeli security regime pressures them to become apolitical, hard-working, and compliant individuals.

Having analysed these multiple dispossessions allows us to see how settler colonialism, as a structure of elimination and domination, operates within ostensibly empowering forms of employment and economic development.

All this has wider political significance. Dispossession through labour incorporation strives to undermine Palestinian nationhood and communal life: to destroy the 'enabling' political effects of indigenous territorial concentration, by fostering meritocratic neoliberal aspirations among Palestinian individuals that undermine the development of an 'unsurrendered' space of native political sovereignty, steadfastness, and resistance in indigenous territory.[78] While my research has underlined the significance of *labour* as a category to explain the economic and political dynamics of settler colonialism,[79] its inherent dispossessive effects also highlight the limits of labour as a source of political power and struggles for social justice in this context.[80] As cross-border market demands combine with the systematic subordination of a marginalized proletariat, Palestinian trade unions have little influence on issues of Palestinian work in Israel and in settlements, while the workers' bargaining power is eliminated by their over-supply, political intimidation, and a lack of fundamental rights. Ultimately, the struggle for decent Palestinian work in Israel's economy does not necessarily contradict or violate the larger struggle for Palestinian independence and liberation: eliminating the inner dispossessions of labour incorporation, while disentangling economic opportunity from colonial domination, will be a prerequisite for any economic decolonization of Palestine.

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